

Sacred Storytelling in The Tourism Development of The Marble Mountains: Insights from Field Data

Pham Quang Ha^{1*}, and Bui Kim Luan¹

¹Hospitality and Tourism Institute, Duy Tan University, Danang, Vietnam

Abstract

This article examines visitor experiences at the Marble Mountains in the context of a gradual decline in the site's sacred depth. In recent years, field observations suggest that some visitor behaviors at the site appear visually oriented and time-limited, including rapid movement, short stops, and photography-focused interactions, while deeper engagement with cultural and spiritual meanings remains uneven. The study is based on a data collection process carried out continuously over a two-month period (from July to September 2025), with the main on-site fieldwork conducted on 13 September 2025 at nine locations on Thủy Sơn, using participant observation, on-site note-taking, and informal conversations with local stakeholders. Findings indicate that the system of caves, pagodas, and legends at the Marble Mountains contains rich layers of storytelling, while the local community-including monks, vendors, and site staff-naturally assumes the role of "community curators" who maintain and transmit sacred narratives. Based on these insights, the article proposes a sacred storytelling model grounded in living heritage approaches to enhance experiential depth and support sustainable cultural tourism development at the Marble Mountains. The findings also suggest future implications for technology-supported heritage interpretation, in which digital tools may support, rather than replace, community-based sacred storytelling.

Keywords: community-based tourism; cultural intelligence; heritage interpretation; living heritage; Marble Mountains; smart tourism; storytelling

Received on 27 December 2025, accepted on 09 June 2026, published on 15 June 2026

Copyright © 2026 Pham Quang Ha *et al.*, licensed to EAI. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#), which permits copying, redistributing, remixing, transformation, and building upon the material in any medium so long as the original work is properly cited.

doi: 10.4108/eectti.11451

1. Introduction

In recent years, cultural tourism has undergone an important shift: from the conventional mode of "seeing and photographing" to a growing interest in meaningful, emotionally engaging experiences. As Mossberg argues, it is emotionally rich experiences that allow visitors to perceive the distinctiveness and authenticity of a place, rather than merely consuming its visual surfaces [1]. In this context, storytelling has increasingly been recognized as an effective tool for fostering emotional engagement and

strengthening the connection between visitors and destinations. According to Chronis (2012), stories do not simply convey information; they construct tourism imaginaries in which visitors actively participate in making sense of heritage [2].

This issue is not unique to the Marble Mountains. In Vietnam, many sacred and pilgrimage destinations possess rich religious, historical, and cultural meanings, yet their interpretive systems remain fragmented or unevenly developed. Sites such as Yên Tử and Hương Pagoda show that sacred tourism often involves a complex interaction between pilgrimage, mass visitation, ritual practice,

¹Corresponding author. Email: phamquangha@dtu.edu.vn

landscape experience, and tourism services [3, 4]. In such contexts, the challenge is not only to preserve physical monuments, but also to mediate sacred meanings so that visitors can engage with heritage at a deeper cultural and spiritual level.

Ngu Hanh Son—a complex of limestone caves, pagodas, inscriptions, and folk legends—possesses a naturally rich foundation for narrative interpretation. However, these narrative layers have not yet been organized into a coherent storytelling structure. The 2024 report by the Management Board of the Ngu Hanh Son Scenic Site indicates that informational materials at various points of interest remain fragmented, underexplained, and insufficient in conveying the sacred qualities of the site [5]. Moreover, the absence of designated storytellers, the lack of a community-based curatorial mechanism, and some visually oriented and time-limited visitor behaviors have collectively diminished the depth of cultural and spiritual engagement available within this heritage landscape.

Addressing this gap, the present article aims to identify the sacred storytelling potential of Ngu Hanh Son based on fieldwork conducted in September 2025. The study seeks to illuminate existing narrative layers, the role of local community members in maintaining the sacred continuum, and the observable and stakeholder-perceived factors that may hinder meaningful visitor engagement. Building on these insights, the article proposes a living heritage-oriented approach as a foundation for developing an appropriate sacred storytelling model that contributes to sustainable cultural tourism development in the area.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Storytelling, Sacred Storytelling, and Religious Interpretation

Storytelling is widely regarded as an important tool for enhancing visitor experience, particularly as cultural tourism increasingly shifts toward meaning-oriented engagement rather than the mere consumption of images. According to Chronis, stories do not simply convey information; they create “tourism imaginaries,” in which visitors interpret and co-construct the meanings of a destination [2]. Similarly, Salazar emphasizes that tourism imaginaries emerge from the interaction between stories, memories, and travelers’ expectations [6]. From an experiential perspective, Mossberg argues that a well-crafted story can evoke immersion and allow visitors to feel part of the experience rather than merely observing it [1]. This perspective is also consistent with Richards, who argues that contemporary cultural tourism increasingly moves beyond the consumption of cultural objects toward more participatory, creative, and meaning-oriented forms of experience [7]. In this study, sacred storytelling is distinguished from conventional religious interpretation. Religious interpretation usually focuses on explaining doctrines, symbols, rituals, sacred objects, or temple histories. Sacred

storytelling is broader: it connects sacred space, local memory, ritual practice, community voices, and visitor meaning-making into a narrative experience. In other words, while religious interpretation explains what a sacred symbol means, sacred storytelling examines how sacred meanings are encountered, felt, narrated, and remembered within a tourism setting. This distinction is important for the Marble Mountains, where caves, pagodas, inscriptions, legends, rituals, monks, vendors, and visitors together shape the sacred meaning of the site.

Table 1. Conceptual Distinction between Religious Interpretation and Sacred Storytelling

Aspect	Religious Interpretation	Sacred Storytelling
Main focus	Explaining doctrines, rituals, symbols, sacred objects, or temple histories	Connecting sacred space, local memory, ritual practice, community voices, and visitor meaning-making
Main question	What does this religious symbol or ritual mean?	How are sacred meanings encountered, felt, narrated, and remembered by visitors?
Mode of communication	Mainly explanatory and information-based	Narrative, experiential, emotional, spatial, and community-based
Key actors	Religious guides, monks, official interpreters	Monks, vendors, residents, guides, staff, visitors
Visitor role	Receiver of religious or cultural information	Co-interpreter and co-creator of meaning
Relevance to Marble Mountains	Explains Buddhist statues, rituals, pagodas, and sacred objects	Links caves, pagodas, inscriptions, legends, rituals, local actors, and visitor experience into one sacred narrative system

2.2. Living Heritage and Community Mediation

The notion of living heritage highlights that heritage value lies not only in physical structures but also in practices, rituals, cultural memories, and forms of knowledge maintained over time. UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage as cultural expressions recognized by communities and transmitted across generations, while being constantly adapted to social contexts [8]. Living heritage is therefore dynamic rather than static; it continues to exist because people practice, remember, narrate, and transmit it. This view is consistent with Smith’s argument that heritage should be understood not only as material inheritance, but also as a cultural and social practice through which meanings are produced and negotiated [9]. In heritage studies, Waterton and Smith underline the central role of local communities, arguing that communities are not merely heritage custodians but also

interpreters who shape meaning and safeguard cultural memory [10]. This role is especially significant at sacred tourism sites, where heritage values are closely tied to ritual practices, embodied knowledge, and spiritual atmosphere. In the context of sacred storytelling, living heritage operates through four mechanisms: transmission, embodiment, mediation, and co-creation. Transmission refers to the passing of sacred meanings through oral narratives, rituals, inscriptions, and collective memory. Embodiment refers to practices such as worship, chanting, incense offering, silence, walking, or climbing through sacred spaces. Mediation involves local actors, including monks, vendors, guides, residents, and site staff, who help translate sacred meanings into accessible stories for visitors. Co-creation occurs when visitors interpret, question, feel, and respond to these meanings during their experience.

At the Marble Mountains, these mechanisms are visible in the interaction between sacred spaces and local actors. Monks transmit religious meanings, vendors and residents preserve local memories, inscriptions record historical-religious narratives, and visitors participate through movement, observation, questions, and ritual behavior. Therefore, sacred storytelling can be understood as a living heritage process rather than merely a communication technique.

2.3. Sacredness and Spiritual Experience

Sacredness in cultural tourism emerges from the interplay between space, memory, and spiritual practices. Collins-Kreiner argues that spiritual experience does not depend solely on the inherent religious value of a site, but also on how visitors perceive and interact with the sacred environment [11]. Similarly, Yanata's study of a Buddhist sacred site in Koyasan shows that tourists' spiritual experience is shaped by the interaction between sacred atmosphere, personal reflection, and interpretive context [12]. Research on pilgrimage also shows that sacred journeys are not only spatial movements but also emotional and cognitive transitions. Reader and Morinis suggest that pilgrimage involves transformation through movement, ritual, and encounter with sacred places [13, 14]. From this perspective, visitor experience at sacred sites depends not only on physical space but also on the interpretive mechanisms available. When sacred narratives are fragmented or inaccessible, visitors may experience the site mainly at a visual level. Conversely, when sacred meanings are mediated through stories, rituals, local voices, and appropriate guidance, visitors are more likely to engage with the site as a living cultural and spiritual landscape. This theoretical position provides the foundation for examining the Marble Mountains as a sacred storytelling space shaped by tangible elements, intangible meanings, and human interaction.

3. Methodology

The data collection process was carried out continuously over a two-month period (from July to September 2025), focusing on nine key sites within Thùy Sơn—including caves, pagodas, shrines, and areas associated with religious practices and tourist activities. Thùy Sơn was selected because it contains the highest concentration of heritage elements and most clearly reflects the intersection between sacred value and tourism dynamics.

The nine sites were selected through purposive site sampling because they represent the main types of sacred and tourism spaces within Thùy Sơn, including caves, pagodas, a stupa, viewpoints, ritual spaces, and visitor routes. Each site was included because it reveals a specific empirical dimension of sacred storytelling, such as moral storytelling, ritual practice, hidden inscriptions, embodied movement, sacred atmosphere, local livelihood, educational needs, or itinerary effects.

Table 2. Detailed List of the Nine Field Survey Sites at Thùy Sơn (Ngũ Hành Sơn)

Code	English Name	Brief Description	Type	Reason for inclusion / Key empirical focus
TS01	Hell Cave	A reconstructed space symbolizing the Buddhist underworld; conveys moral lessons	Cave	Moral storytelling, infernal symbolism, symbolic journey
TS02	Linh Úng Pagoda	Major Buddhist temple; houses statues and ritual spaces	Pagoda	Ritual practice, visitor behavior, sacred-service tension
TS03	Relic Tower (Stupa)	Stupa built between 1997-2003 preserving relics	Buddhist Monument	Hidden inscription, interpretation gap
TS04	Through-Cloud Cave	Vertical cave symbolizing transcendence; "path to enlightenment"	Cave	Embodied movement, vertical transition, spiritual ascent
TS05	Sacred Stone Cave	Narrow cavern with natural sounds and mythic associations	Cave	Quiet sacred atmosphere, contemplative space
TS06	Upper Thai Peak	Highest peak of Thùy Sơn; overlooking sea and city	Peak / Landscape	Emotional landscape, panoramic experience
TS07	Huyen Khong Cave	Cave with dramatic natural light; shrines to Guan Yu and attendants	Cave	Sacred atmosphere, visitor attitude, Buddhist-folk fusion

TS08	Tu Tam Pagoda	Small pagoda linked to community religious life	Pagoda	Monk interview, educational storytelling, visitor behavior
TS09	Tam Thai Pagoda	Royal-era pagoda (Minh Mang period); main ritual route	Pagoda	Itinerary effect, visitor fatigue, reduced attention

A qualitative approach was employed, combining multiple field-based data sources. First, participant observation was used to document visitor behavior, the atmosphere of sacred spaces, and ongoing religious practices. Second, field notes were taken to record details related to the landscape, cultural symbols, and natural interactions encountered along the survey route. Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted with vendors, monks, and site staff to gather narratives and local perspectives. In addition, informal conversations, the researcher’s experiential diary, on-site inscriptions, and visual materials were used to supplement and triangulate the primary data.

Table 3. Data Sources and Analytical Functions

Data source	Description	Function in analysis
Direct observation	On-site observation of spatial settings and visitor behavior	Identify movement, atmosphere, and visible engagement
Field notes	Detailed notes written after field visits	Capture context and reflections
Semi-structured interviews	Interviews with monks, vendors, and staff	Provide local/stakeholder perspectives
Informal conversations	Natural interactions with visitors and residents	Supplement primary data
Experiential diary	Researcher’s first-hand experiential records	Reflect embodied engagement with space
Inscriptions and visual materials	Steles, symbols, photos, visual materials	Provide historical and symbolic context

To ensure adequate representation of local knowledge holders, the study employed a purposeful sampling strategy. A total of 13 participants took part in semi-structured interviews, including six long-term vendors operating in the Thùy Sơn area, three monks who are currently practicing or managing pagodas within the complex, and four operational staff members who guide or support visitor services. The interviews lasted between 10 and 25 minutes and were conducted directly on-site to capture participants’ lived experiences, local knowledge, and naturally occurring interactions. Because the study did not include direct tourist interviews, visitor engagement is examined through observable behavior, field notes, informal conversations, and local stakeholders’

perceptions rather than through tourists’ self-reported experiences. The sampling distribution was intentionally designed to access those groups that play essential roles in sustaining the narrative flow and maintaining the sacred atmosphere of the site.

Table 4. Participant Groups and Sampling Rationale

Participant group	Number	Reason for inclusion	Knowledge contribution
Vendors	6	Daily contact with visitors and local livelihood practices	Oral narratives, visitor behavior, informal storytelling
Monks	3	Religious authority and ritual knowledge	Sacred meanings, temple history, ritual continuity
Operational staff	4	Practical role in visitor management	Visitor flows, site operation, behavioral guidance
Total	13	Key local knowledge holders	Sacred storytelling and heritage interpretation

Although the number of interview participants was relatively small, the study followed a qualitative and exploratory logic rather than a statistical logic of representativeness. The 13 participants were selected through purposive sampling because they represented key local knowledge holders within the Thùy Sơn area, including vendors, monks, and operational staff. These groups were directly involved in daily interactions with visitors, the maintenance of sacred practices, the transmission of local narratives, and the practical management of visitor flows.

The data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach consisting of three main stages. First, data from observations, field notes, and interviews were subjected to open coding to identify initial meanings and recurring patterns in participants’ narratives and observed behaviors. Second, axial coding was conducted to connect the codes into broader conceptual categories, clarifying the relationships between sacred space, cultural memory, and visitor experience. Third, thematic synthesis was employed to consolidate these categories into central thematic clusters, which subsequently informed the construction of the sacred storytelling model presented in the discussion section.

Table 5. Example of Coding Process from Field Data

Raw empirical material	Initial code	Analytical category	Theme
------------------------	--------------	---------------------	-------

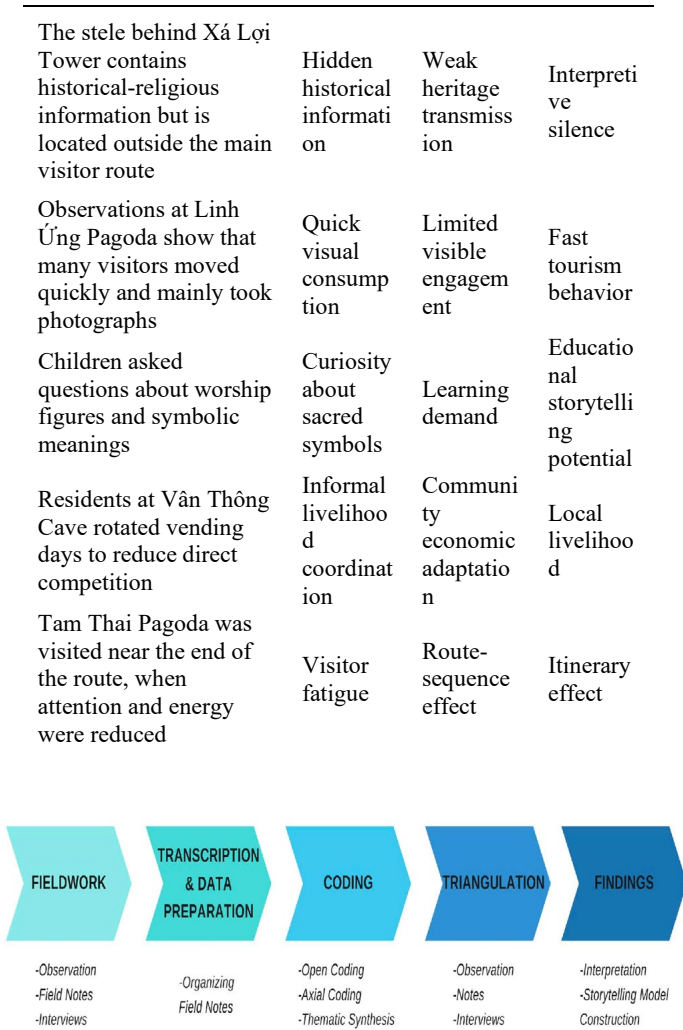


Figure 1. Data analysis workflow illustrating the process from fieldwork to thematic synthesis and triangulation

To ensure the credibility and robustness of the dataset, the study employed a triangulation mechanism across multiple field-based sources, including participant observation, field notes, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, the researcher’s experiential diary, on-site inscriptions, and visual materials. Field notes were cross-checked with participants’ narratives and observational materials to identify both convergences and discrepancies, thereby minimizing interpretive bias. Interview data were likewise verified through multiple rounds of reading and independent coding, followed by comparison with observational codes to enhance thematic consistency. In addition, collecting data over multiple visits to the same site strengthened the dependability of the findings, ensuring that the patterns identified did not merely reflect momentary situations but recurring experiential forms. This approach aligns with the “big-tent” criteria proposed by Tracy, particularly authenticity, thick description, and transparency in interpretation [15].

During the later interviews and cross-site analysis, recurring patterns emerged regarding fragmented interpretation, sacred atmosphere, visitor behavior, informal local storytelling, and the absence of coordinated curatorial mechanisms. This repetition suggests that thematic saturation was substantially reached within the exploratory scope of the study. In addition, interview data were triangulated with direct observation, field notes, informal conversations, experiential diary entries, on-site inscriptions, and visual materials.

Regarding ethical considerations, the study followed the guidelines of Israel and Hay (2006), ensuring respect for participants, minimizing disruptions to sacred spaces, and maintaining confidentiality [16]. Participants were informed of the research purpose and retained the right to decline or withdraw at any stage.

4. Finding & Discussion

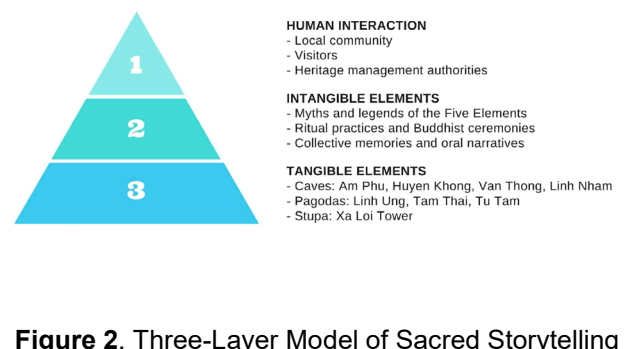


Figure 2. Three-Layer Model of Sacred Storytelling at the Marble Mountains (Ngu Hanh Son)

Figure 2 illustrates the three-layer structure of sacred storytelling at the Marble Mountains (Ngu Hanh Son). The model consists of: (1) the human interaction layer, comprising local residents, visitors, and heritage management authorities ;(2) the intangible layer, which includes myths, rituals, and collective memories forming the cultural substance of sacred stories; and (3) the tangible layer, where caves, pagodas, and the stupa provide physical settings for narrative formation. These three layers operate simultaneously to create the distinctive “sacred storytelling space” of the heritage site.

4.1 Physical Spaces as Foundations for Sacred Storytelling

The fieldwork conducted across nine sites in Thuy Son indicates that the physical landscape plays a central role in shaping the sacred narratives of Ngu Hanh Son. Am Phu Cave recreates the structure of the ten Buddhist hell realms, blending folk beliefs and Buddhist cosmology. The progression through statues, symbolic panels, and rhythmic drum beats evokes a journey of moral reflection, guiding visitors to contemplate the duality of good and evil.

Huyen Khong Cave creates a contrasting atmosphere, with natural light pouring through the ceiling and illuminating the statues of the Three Saints (Guan Yu, Zhou Cang, Guan Ping). Field observations and informal conversations suggest that this space was often perceived as calm, serene, and spiritually suggestive, showing how the interplay of light and sacred iconography may shape emotional responses. Meanwhile, Xa Loi Tower and its modern-era steles introduce a contemporary layer of religious narrative, reflecting how spiritual practices continue to evolve.

These spaces function as “story-scapes,” a concept proposed by Chronis, in which landscapes are embedded with symbols and narratives that enable visitors to engage imaginatively with heritage [2]. However, due to limited interpretive materials and fragmented presentation, many of these narratives remain latent and are not fully activated for visitors.

4.2 Layers of Memory, Myth, and Ritual

Beyond material structures, Ngu Hanh Son possesses rich layers of intangible heritage, expressed through the legend of the Five Elements, origin stories of the mountains, and Buddhist rituals such as chanting, incense offering, and commemorative ceremonies. These elements illustrate what UNESCO defines as living heritage, wherein cultural value is continuously recreated through practice and intergenerational transmission [8].

Field observations reveal that visitors often express interest in these stories and rituals but have difficulty accessing reliable information without the guidance of local carriers of knowledge. As a result, the sacred experience becomes disjointed, lacking a coherent narrative thread to connect myth, space, and ritual practice.

The abundance of intangible heritage at Ngu Hanh Son is thus present but not fully articulated. This underscores the need for structured storytelling to revive and sustain the site’s sacred qualities.

4.3 Local Community as “Natural Curators”

A key finding of the study is the significant role of the local community in preserving and interpreting heritage. Vendors routinely recount local legends to curious visitors; monks provide explanations about temple history and religious symbolism; and ticket staff possess practical knowledge of visitor flows and operational routines.

Their stories and experiences form a living web of knowledge, positioning them as “natural curators” of the site. This aligns with Waterton and Smith’s argument that communities are not merely heritage custodians but also interpreters who shape meaning and ensure cultural continuity [10].

However, these interpretive practices are largely informal and uncoordinated. Without structured support or training, the community’s storytelling remains inconsistent, and

visitors may miss opportunities to engage deeply with the site’s cultural and spiritual significance.

4.4 Visible Visitor Behavior and Interpretive Gaps

This section focuses on visible patterns of visitor behavior and local stakeholders’ perceptions of visitor engagement. Since tourists were not directly interviewed, the analysis does not claim to fully capture visitors’ internal motivations, emotional responses, or spiritual experiences. At Tù Tàm Pagoda, the abbot provided a local stakeholder’s perspective on visitor engagement: “I have not seen visitors come here to learn about history; they come to look around, take photos, and leave quickly, without staying to explore or asking questions about the historical background.” This statement does not represent tourists’ own self-reported motivations, but it provides important field-based evidence of how local religious actors perceive the gap between the historical-spiritual depth of the site and visitors’ visible patterns of engagement.

While the site holds significant potential for meaningful engagement, the fieldwork also documents behaviors that disrupt the sacred atmosphere: inappropriate clothing, loud conversations, and the use of temples and caves as photo backdrops. These behaviors reflect misrecognition, a concept used by Waterton and Smith to describe situations where tourist expectations clash with the cultural values of local communities [10].

Shackley argues that managing visitor behavior is crucial for safeguarding sacred sites, as inappropriate conduct can diminish both the authenticity of the space and the experience itself [17]. At Ngu Hanh Son, the absence of clear guidelines, signage, and interpretive materials contributes to the prevalence of such behaviors, ultimately weakening visitors’ capacity to engage with the site in a respectful and meaningful manner.

Beyond the Marble Mountains, these findings also point to a broader issue in Vietnamese sacred tourism. Many sacred destinations in Vietnam are rich in legends, rituals, religious spaces, and community memories, but these values are not always translated into coherent interpretive experiences for visitors. Therefore, the Marble Mountains should not be understood only as an isolated local case, but also as a representative example of how sacred heritage sites may face a gap between cultural-spiritual depth and visitor interpretation. The sacred storytelling model proposed in this study may therefore offer a useful analytical and practical reference for other Vietnamese sacred destinations facing similar challenges [3, 4].

4.5 Synthesis

Taken together, the four clusters of findings demonstrate that Ngu Hanh Son holds all the necessary components for developing sacred storytelling: symbolic landscapes, rich living heritage, an active local community, and compelling

narratives. Yet without coherent interpretation, curator structures, or visitor guidance, these elements remain disconnected. This highlights the need for a storytelling model grounded in living heritage—one that empowers the community, safeguards sacredness, and enriches visitor experience.

4.6 Future Implications for Technology-Supported Interpretation

The findings of this study primarily concern human interpretation, sacred space, and community-based storytelling rather than smart tourism technology. However, the fieldwork reveals a recurring interpretive gap: many sacred meanings embedded in caves, pagodas, inscriptions, rituals, and local narratives are not easily accessible to visitors. For this reason, future destination management may consider technology-supported interpretation, such as QR-based micro-stories, short audio guides, or multilingual signage. These tools should not replace local curators, monks, vendors, or guides, but may function as supportive interfaces when direct human interpretation is unavailable. Since this study did not directly examine technological readiness among tourists or local stakeholders, such tools should be understood as future-oriented implications rather than empirically tested findings.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Recommendations and Management Implications

Based on the analysis above, this study proposes adopting a “local curator” model to strengthen interpretation and sustain the sacred narrative at the Ngũ Hành Sơn complex. This model aligns with the collaborative governance approach emphasized by Ansell and Gash, in which local stakeholders jointly participate in shaping and managing cultural values [18].

In the context of Ngũ Hành Sơn, local curators may include monks, vendors, and tour guides—individuals who live, work, and possess embodied knowledge of the sacred landscape. Three core roles are proposed: (1) Story interpreters, who convey legends, narratives, and symbolic meanings; (2) Guardians of sacred continuity, who maintain light rituals or subtle practices that help visitors enter a respectful emotional state; (3) Behavior facilitators, who guide visitors regarding appropriate clothing, noise levels, and conduct within temples and caves.

However, the local curator model should not rely solely on voluntary participation. Vendors, monks, guides, and site staff already have their own economic, religious, and operational responsibilities. Therefore, their involvement requires appropriate incentives and support mechanisms, such as official recognition, short training certificates,

inclusion in guided storytelling routes, small service-based compensation, or benefit-sharing mechanisms. For vendors, storytelling may also increase visitor trust and extend interaction time, but it should not interrupt their livelihood activities. Field observations at Vân Thông Cave further support this point. Local vending activities were not organized as fixed full-time tourism work; rather, residents appeared to rotate selling days and combine tourism-related vending with other livelihood activities. This suggests that community participation in sacred storytelling should be aligned with existing livelihood rhythms, rather than imposed as additional unpaid labor. For monks and religious actors, participation should remain respectful, optional, and arranged in ways that do not disrupt ritual duties. This operational direction also extends the author’s previous work on local curatorship in heritage tourism, which emphasized local curator training, co-creation, benefit-sharing, community empowerment, and the use of light digital tools to support community-led heritage interpretation [19, 20].

Beyond the curator model, it is necessary to design thematic sacred storytelling routes that link key points on Thùy Sơn into a coherent visitor experience. Improving informational signage, sacred-space etiquette markers, and other visual guidelines will help visitors access accurate information and reduce behaviors that unintentionally disrupt the spiritual atmosphere. These measures contribute to balancing heritage preservation with enhanced visitor experience.

Table 6. Classification of Local “Curator” Roles at Ngũ Hành Sơn

Stakeholder Group	Role	Support Needed	Governance Note
Vendors	Spontaneous storytellers	Service fee, route inclusion, recognition	Should not disrupt livelihood activities
Monks / Buddhist clergy	Guardians of sacred continuity	Institutional recognition, respectful scheduling	Should not interfere with ritual duties
Ticketing staff	Behavior facilitators	Training, role recognition	Should align with visitor-flow management
Local tour guides	Cultural mediators	Paid routes, shared script	Should be coordinated with site management
Local residents	Memory holders	Allowance, community recognition	Participation should be voluntary and rotating

To operationalize the local curator model, a structured involvement and capacity-building mechanism is needed. First, local knowledge holders should be identified through consultation with the site management board, religious institutions, and local community representatives. Second, storytelling content should be co-created with local actors

so that official heritage interpretation can be balanced with lived memory, ritual knowledge, and community voice. Third, short training sessions should be provided on heritage interpretation, visitor communication, sacred-space etiquette, and basic multilingual storytelling. Fourth, a governance structure should coordinate the participation of the management board, pagodas, tourism operators, guides, vendors, and residents. Finally, feedback and incentive mechanisms should be introduced to ensure that participation remains voluntary, respectful, and beneficial for local actors.

Table 7. Proposed Governance and Capacity-Building Mechanism for Local Curators

Step	Mechanism	Purpose
1	Identify local knowledge holders	Identify actors with local, religious, or experiential knowledge
2	Co-create storytelling content	Develop content with local actors, not through top-down narratives
3	Provide capacity building	Train actors in storytelling, etiquette, and visitor communication
4	Coordinate governance	Link management board, pagodas, community, and tourism operators
5	Provide incentives	Provide recognition, service fees, route inclusion, and benefit-sharing
6	Evaluate and revise	Use visitor and community feedback to improve implementation

Although this study primarily adopts a qualitative and cultural approach, its findings offer relevant implications for smart tourism and intelligent heritage interpretation. The sacred storytelling model identified at the Marble Mountains can be understood as a cultural knowledge framework that may inform technology-supported interpretation without compromising sacred authenticity. Digital tools such as QR-based narratives, mobile audio storytelling, or smart signage can function as supportive interfaces that connect visitors to layered sacred meanings while guiding appropriate behavior in spiritual spaces. Rather than replacing community storytellers, such technologies may enhance cultural intelligence by mediating access to narratives when direct human interaction is limited. Integrating sacred storytelling into smart tourism thus highlights the importance of aligning technological innovation with living heritage and community-based interpretation.

5.2 Future Implications for Technology-Supported Interpretation

The findings of this study primarily concern human interpretation, sacred space, and community-based storytelling rather than smart tourism technology.

However, the fieldwork reveals a recurring interpretive gap: many sacred meanings embedded in caves, pagodas, inscriptions, rituals, and local narratives are not easily accessible to visitors. For this reason, future destination management may consider technology-supported interpretation, such as QR-based micro-stories, short audio guides, or multilingual signage. These tools should not replace local curators, monks, vendors, or guides, but may function as supportive interfaces when direct human interpretation is unavailable. Since this study did not directly examine technological readiness among tourists or local stakeholders, such tools should be understood as future-oriented implications rather than empirically tested findings.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations. First, the number of interview participants was relatively small, consisting of 13 local stakeholders. Although these participants were selected as key local knowledge holders and the data were triangulated with multiple field-based sources, the findings should be understood as exploratory rather than statistically representative. Second, the two-month fieldwork period did not fully capture all seasonal variations in pilgrimage and tourism activities. Third, tourists were not directly interviewed; therefore, the study does not claim to fully capture visitors’ internal motivations, emotional responses, or spiritual experiences. Future research should incorporate tourist interviews, longer-term observation, and pilot testing of sacred storytelling routes. In addition, the study did not examine technological readiness among tourists or local stakeholders; therefore, technology-supported interpretation should be further tested in future research before being implemented as a management solution.

5.4 Conclusion

The findings indicate that Ngũ Hành Sơn holds strong narrative potential through its interplay of landscape, legends, and religious practices. When organized through storytelling, these elements can generate deeper sacred experiences for visitors. Approaching the site as living heritage and empowering local communities play essential roles in this process. Integrating management, interpretation, and visitor experience is therefore a vital direction for sustainable cultural tourism development at Ngũ Hành Sơn.

References

- [1] L. Mossberg, “Extraordinary experiences through storytelling,” *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 2008; vol. 8(3):195–210.
- [2] A. Chronis, “Between place and story: Gettysburg as tourism imaginary,” *Annals of Tourism Research*, 2012; vol. 39(4):1797–1816.

- [3] Vietnam National Authority of Tourism. *Huong Pagoda – a unique spiritual destination of the north*. Available: <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/en/post/15716>
- [4] UNESCO World Heritage Centre. *Yen Tu-Vinh Nghiem-Con Son, Kiep Bac Complex of Monuments and Landscapes*. Available: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1732/>
- [5] Ban Quản Lý Di tích Danh thắng Ngũ Hành Sơn. *Tổng quan di tích và truyền thuyết Ngũ Hành Sơn* [Overview of monuments and legends of Ngu Hanh Son]. 2024. Available: <https://nguhanhson.org/news/tong-quan/vi-tri-dac-diem-dia-chat-quan-the-ngu-hanh-son>
- [6] N. B. Salazar, "Tourism imaginaries: A conceptual approach," *Annals of Tourism Research*, 2012; vol. 39(2):863–882.
- [7] G. Richards, *Rethinking Cultural Tourism: New Perspectives on Theory and Practice*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar; 2022.
- [8] UNESCO. *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Paris: UNESCO; 2003.
- [9] L. Smith, *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge; 2006.
- [10] E. Waterton, L. Smith, "The recognition and misrecognition of community heritage," *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 2010; vol. 16(1–2):4–15.
- [11] N. Collins-Kreiner, "The geography of pilgrimage and tourism: Transformations and implications for applied geography," *Applied Geography*, 2010; vol. 30(1):153–164.
- [12] K. Yanata, "What makes tourists' experience spiritual? A case study of a Buddhist sacred site in Koyasan, Japan," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 2021; vol. 9(3):Article 3. doi:10.21427/XGQG-QB79.
- [13] I. Reader, *Pilgrimage in the Marketplace*. London: Routledge; 2013.
- [14] A. Morinis, *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press; 1992.
- [15] S. J. Tracy, "Qualitative quality: Eight 'big-tent' criteria for excellent qualitative research," *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2010; vol. 16(10):837–851.
- [16] M. Israel, I. Hay, *Research Ethics for Social Scientists*. London: SAGE Publications; 2006.
- [17] M. Shackley, *Managing Sacred Sites: Service Provision and Visitor Experience*. London: Continuum; 2001.
- [18] C. Ansell, A. Gash, "Collaborative governance in theory and practice," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 2008; vol. 18(4):543–571.
- [19] Q. H. Pham, P.-J. Chen, T. T. N. Tran, "Reconstructing heritage village tourism experiences: Lessons from Huangling and Duong Lam on training cultural-technological curators," in *Proceedings of the National Conference on Customer Experience Management in the Digital Era and International Integration*, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, Jul. 12, 2025. Hanoi: Science and Technology Publishing House, 2025, pp. 202–217. ISBN: 978-604-67-3387-4.
- [20] Q. H. Pham, P.-J. Chen, H. L. Pham, "Local curators as an emerging institutional model in heritage tourism development: A comparative case study of Huangling (China) and Duong Lam (Vietnam)," in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Contemporary Issues in Tourism Research*, Hanoi, Vietnam, Oct. 17–18, 2025. Hanoi: Knowledge Publishing House, 2025, pp. 50–85. ISBN: 978-632-621-845-9.